

VZCZCXRO9934  
RR RUEHAST RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHDBU RUEHLH RUEHNEH RUEHPW  
DE RUEHNE #1328/01 1771230  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 261230Z JUN 09  
FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 7139  
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 7805  
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 3542  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 6571  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1808  
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 1396  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUEIDN/DNI WASHINGTON DC  
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 8239  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 8442  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC  
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 001328

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KWMN](#) [PINR](#) [KDEM](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: WOMEN IN THE LOK SABHA: IS IT A CHAMPAGNE MOMENT?

REF: A) NEW DELHI 01226 B) NEW DELHI 1062

11. SUMMARY: The 2009 parliamentary election highlighted the possible emergence of women leaders in Indian politics, with the focus on Meira Kumar as the speaker of the 15th Lok Sabha (lower house of Parliament) along with a contingent of influential women leaders vying for parliamentary seats. Fifty-eight of the new Lok Sabha's 543 members are women. The media and public impression is these MPs represent the aspirations of Indian women, who represent 48 percent of the total population. It is not clear if the new legislators will prove to be a formidable force in Indian politics as suggested by the media. Many of the women are descendents of powerful Indian political families; others were "handpicked" by Rahul Gandhi and have established ties with the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. End Summary.

-----  
PARADIGM SHIFT OR MEDIA HYPE?  
-----

12. In the run-up to April-May parliamentary elections, local media followed closely the campaigns of Indian women leaders, representing a broad range of experience from established politicians to fresh-faced youngsters. The media often portrayed these candidates as symbolizing the rise of India's women, who make up 48 percent of the country's 1.15 billion population. Some political observers, however, believe the "women's wave" in the 15th Lok Sabha is simply media hype, and that the so-called wave will have a minimal effect on the male-dominated Indian political landscape. While the 58 elected women have breached the ten percent ceiling for the first time and are more visible in the political arena, the current Lok Sabha has only 15 more women representatives than the previous one.

13. Prominent women's groups welcomed the election results, but cautioned against premature jubilation. Well-known author Shobha De cautioned, "one would like to see this as a positive change, but it's always not about numbers. It's the quality and commitment that count." Ranjana Kumari, President of Women Power Connect, an umbrella organization of several hundred women NGO's, added the "real test" is if political parties allow these women to engage in debate on the floor of the Lok Sabha. Kumari warned that women politicians will remain mere tokens unless they are "integrated" into the national political mainframe.

-----  
POLITICAL LEGACIES CONTINUE  
-----

¶4. Most women leaders in the 15th Lok Sabha belong to families with deep political connections. Speaker Meira Kumar is a daughter of a former deputy Prime Minister and Dalit leader, while Praneet Kaur, Minister of State for External affairs, is the wife of a former Chief Minister of Punjab. Harsimrat Kaur Badal, MP from Punjab is married to the present Deputy Chief Minister of Punjab. The "voice of the North-East" Agatha Sangma is the daughter of a former Speaker of the Lok Sabha and from a prominent political family in Meghalaya.

¶5. Many novice politicians belonging to political families with good educational backgrounds made it to the 15th Lok Sabha. Their next elections, as incumbents judged on performance and accomplishments will be interesting to note. Veteran female politicians like Meira Kumar, Krishna Tirath and Sushma Swaraj have secured spots as Lok Sabha speaker, Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Women and Child Development and Deputy Leader of the Opposition, respectively.

-----  
SOME FRESH-FACED LEADERS  
-----

¶6. A small number of women represent their constituencies as self-made members of parliament (MP). Meenakshi Natarajan, who lacks an elite political pedigree, is a first time MP from Madhya

NEW DELHI 00001328 002 OF 002

Pradesh (Reftel A and B) and was handpicked by Congress General Secretary Rahul Gandhi to run for office. Natarajan is passionate about energizing the youth and students to join politics.. However, Natarajan's rise from grassroots student politics represents the exception and not the rule.

-----  
THE NORTH/SOUTH DIVIDE  
-----

¶7. Despite higher social and educational indicators in South India (barring Andhra Pradesh), there was a virtual absence of women candidates or winners from South India. Karnataka exceeds the 30 percent quota for representation of women in Panchayati Raj institutions (local grassroots governance), but only sent one woman to the Lok Sabha. Over the last 15 terms of the Lok Sabha, only 11 women MP's from Kerala have been nominated and elected, a clear indication that high development indicators have not always translated into gender equity at the political level. Tamil Nadu's two regional parties, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (headed by a woman) and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, nominated two female candidates, only one of whom won her seat. Tamil freelance author and journalist Vaasanti noted "male contenders are very strong and women candidates are simply not allowed to go forward."

¶8. In comparison, five states from North India have sent 22 women MPs to the lower house. Uttar Pradesh (U.P.), the largest state in India and one ruled by a female chief minister, sent 12 women members to the 15th Lok Sabha. However the role of dynastic politics is still apparent. Amongst the winners from U.P. are three widows, two daughters-in-law, three wives, and one daughter from well-connected political families.

-----  
COMMENT: CAUTIOUS CELEBRATION  
-----

¶9. Despite the media and public attention surrounding the new batch of female MPs, most are either handpicked by Congress General Secretary Rahul Gandhi (Reftels A and B) or are relatives of powerful politicians, and could simply represent a transfer of power from within "old guard" Indian politics rather than any substantive change. Moreover, it is not clear if these new legislators will

prove to be a formidable force in national politics. Unless their parties give them the same opportunities to lead and participate as male MPs, these female MPs may just remain "tokens" of the political establishment. END COMMENT.

BURLEIGH